

"Put them on dying ground and they will live."

—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

The Ninth Ground, a term derived from the ancient military text *The Art of War*, refers to the last of the nine grounds—the dying ground.

If someone were trying to kill you, would you use every means at your disposal to defend yourself? And if someone took everything you owned, would you start the process of rebuilding? Well, your response to being sentenced to a long prison term, life, or even death should be the same as your response to defending yourself from attack or great loss: you should fight.

We view the prison environment as dying ground and "fighting" as a metaphor for self-determination. One of the biggest mistakes many people make when coming to prison is that they don't initially comprehend the extremity of their circumstances. Instead, they jump into the flow of the environment, and thus fail productively to utilize those first crucial three to five years in prison for acquiring knowledge and building the

necessary foundation that will sustain them for years to come.

Self-determination should never be relegated to "just getting by."

Self-determination should always be a priority, and anything less should be unacceptable.

"Plan for difficulty when it is still easy, do the great when it is still small."

—Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*

From the moment we step into the prison system we need to begin a program that organizes our energy toward productive goals. We have to kick-start the growth process. In prison your back is even more up against the wall than ever, so it is imperative immediately to see the place for what it is—dying ground. Since prison culture is a gross extension of the street culture most prisoners come from, there is a tendency to merge with it even though the pitfalls are obvious. You must begin to think strategically, as if you are always on the battlefield. When you take this approach to your situation, you will not squander time but rather move with a profound sense of mission.

"If they are to die there, what can they not achieve?"

—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

When on dying ground you have no fear because you are already in hell. With this philosophy you can only go forward. For many prisoners a life or death sentence means: "It's too late to change" or "What's the point? I'm not ever getting out." But survival does not mean merely existing from day to day, going from one hustle to the next. Even the most veteran prisoner will admit that the "play-it-by-ear" lifestyle gets old. Our life in prison doesn't have to rotate around waking up and hanging out. It should involve the total employment of all of our faculties geared toward enriching our lives. It doesn't matter where we are, be it in prison or free, we should engage life, not retreat from it. Just because we suffer a defeat or come to prison doesn't mean we should give up our aspirations, goals, and the desire to better ourselves.

On the contrary, we should become even more committed to learning, taking the initiative, building resources, and never giving up. A life without purpose and direction is the life of a walking corpse. There is no

middle ground when it comes to surviving, so don't settle for easy or comfortable little niches that offer no real substance. The harder you push yourself the more you learn how to put theory into practice; how to learn from your mistakes; and how to take optimal advantage of every opportunity. Everything you do must lead you forward not backward.

"Power is the ability to define your reality and then have others respond to your definition."

—Dr. Wade Nobles

Imagine standing at the base of a pyramid gazing up at the top. Right away you get a rudimentary sense of the intelligence, the resources, and energy that took to build it. You also understand that the pyramid symbolizes the idea that anything is possible. All one has to do is take initiative. As when looking up at the pyramid, there comes a point in every prisoner's time when they take a long and honest review of their life and it is at that moment they realize it is going to require a strong will and sincere effort to rebuild it. This

fact often discourages many prisoners and they stagnate themselves with a lack of self-confidence, complacency, and mental inertia even before trying. Old patterns die hard and not every prisoner is willing (or ready) to let go of what they have become accustomed to. We will be the first to admit that transformation is neither a quick nor easy process. It calls for the full investment of your mind and body. Anything not congruent with your mission will be a distraction and hindrance toward defining your reality.

"We cannot afford to waste time in dealing with insoluble problems under impossible conditions."

—Edward W. Blyden

The will deteriorates when the mind is not focused, and when your mind is not focused then your energy will be drained, and your response to your situation will be ineffective. Don't invest time or energy into people who are unreliable. The revolutionary George Jackson once commented, "When someone does not judiciously [and effectively] execute my affairs

then I have every right to remove my bosom interest from their hands." In other words, you should not simply rely on the good intentions and benevolence of others. You should always be working toward self-sufficiency. The facts we need to come to terms with when we come to prison include these: people change, people face hardships, and people die. Assessing your own abilities and strengthening them through education and discipline brings you closer to self-reliance. Action produces change, creates results, and eliminates obstacles. Inaction produces passivity, escapism, and excuses. Once you take the position that your life is being threatened, you psychologically prepare yourself to do battle. You get rid of your baggage. You become focused, and you strive without compromise to accomplish your objectives.

"One who fears tomorrow has already died today."

—Ajani Kamara

Prison is not the beginning of the end, but it can be the end of the mentality that got you there. You can build step-by-step a viable plan for success. How you play the endgame is up to

you, but the moment you forget or ignore that you are on dying ground, you have already lost. Take your stand now, right where you are, and don't let anything hold you back. Here are five changes you should make that will strengthen your character and resolve:

- 1) Take initiative. Learn to depend on your own ability and intelligence.
- 2) Take responsibility for yourself. Become self-reliant.
- 3) Quit making excuses.
- 4) Don't assume people owe you something.
- 5) Stop holding onto the past.

Adaptation and change are inevitable and necessary. In prison we can waste away in the cycle of conflict, boredom, and reminiscing, or we can choose to fight and build.

"We're going to have to fight to win. The logic of procrastination has been destroyed."

—George Jackson, *Blood In My Eye*

The Ninth Ground



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